

## Section Three: Recreation and Parks

FY 2005 County Parks Rebate	\$ 71,740
County Cost Rebate Estimate	\$ 75,678
City Cost Rebate Estimate (with administration and capital expenditures)	\$ 315,684
Actual City Expenditure (excludes general administration and capital expenditures)	\$ 266,080

FY 2005 County Recreation Rebate	\$ -
County Cost Rebate Estimate (Insufficient information to make estimate)	\$ -
City Cost Rebate Estimate (with administration and capital expenditures)	\$ 887,029
Actual City Expenditure (excludes general administration and capital expenditures)	\$ 1,045,394

### *Background*

An understanding of the current state of the City's delivery of recreation and park services rests upon the City's unique relationship to Prince George's County and Montgomery County. In 1927, the State of Maryland created the Metropolitan District for Montgomery County and Prince George's County, allowing local municipalities to opt out of paying a county property tax earmarked for recreation and parks. Rockville, Gaithersburg and Greenbelt chose to operate their own programs. Takoma Park decided instead to rely on both Montgomery and Prince George's counties as a primary source of recreation and park services.

Forty years later in 1967, Takoma Park established its own Recreation Department but again did not attempt to opt out of paying either the recreation or parks property tax. Montgomery County continued to provide numerous recreation programs within the City, including camps, adult classes and access to the pool at Piney Branch Elementary School. Prince George's County ran several successful programs from the recreation center and gym on New Hampshire Avenue, near Langley Park.

Meanwhile, the City focused the delivery of its recreation services, such as summer camps, to low-income families. The scope of the City's offerings expanded in the 1980's and 1990's but was hampered by the loss of three Montgomery County facilities within the City – one by fire, and two for safety reasons.

In 1997, following unification of Takoma Park entirely within Montgomery County, the City began to assume more responsibility for recreation and parks. The Prince George's County recreation staff withdrew from the City and transferred the New Hampshire Avenue recreation center to Montgomery County, which subsequently turned over operations of the facility to the Takoma Park Recreation Department through a memorandum of understanding. In the late 1990's the City also negotiated MOUs with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPEC) and with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) for permitting rights to the athletic fields adjacent to Piney Branch Elementary and Takoma Park Middle Schools. These arrangements allowed the Takoma Park Recreation Department, along with local volunteer-run nonprofit groups, to expand programming.

The changes also coincided with a decision by Montgomery County to eliminate recreation offerings inside Takoma Park and concentrate its programs at widely dispersed community centers, the nearest of which is the Long Branch community center on Piney Branch Road, outside city limits. In 2003, Montgomery County transferred operations of the Piney Branch Elementary pool to the YMCA, marking the end of county staffing of recreation programs and facilities inside Takoma Park.

Today the Takoma Park Recreation Department is the sole provider of government-run recreation services inside City limits, offering after-school programs, classes, sports and other activities at public schools, parks and fields, the New Hampshire Ave. facility and the current municipal building. Takoma Park's new community center, scheduled to open in stages in 2005, will be the first City-owned recreation facility. It will be a large venue for indoor programs and is expected to afford another significant increase in recreation services.

## Municipal Comparisons

Understanding of Takoma Park's recreational programs is also assisted by comparison to nearby municipalities. Over decades, both Rockville and Gaithersburg developed a large infrastructure for recreation and parks. Rockville owns two community centers, two gyms, seven neighborhood centers, a theater, a senior center, a swim center, a skate-park, numerous sports fields and a golf course. Plans are in development for a third community center and a gym. Gaithersburg owns a community center, two gyms, a senior center, an outdoor pool, athletic fields, a skate-park and has plans to build a second community center and third gym.

Greenbelt, a bedroom community in Prince George's County that is demographically comparable to Takoma Park, owns and maintains a community center, two youth centers, three gyms, athletic fields and an aquatic-fitness center.

### Comparison of Takoma Park and Nearby Municipalities

**Table 8. FY05 Municipal Spending on Recreation and Parks**

Municipality	Population	Recreation & Parks Spending (Total)	Recreation & Parks Spending (Per Capita)
Rockville	47,388	\$15,546,491	\$ 328
Greenbelt	21,456	\$4,111,900	\$ 192
Gaithersburg	57,242	\$7,498,763	\$ 131
Takoma Park	17,299	\$1,316,080	\$ 75

As the above chart reflects, Rockville has budgeted \$328 per capita in operating expenses for recreation and parks, Greenbelt \$192 per capita, and Gaithersburg \$131 per capita, all considerably more than Takoma Park.

Although the number and quality of recreational facilities within Takoma Park, as well as City spending on recreation and parks, is far less, Takoma Park in recent years has acquired control over the New Hampshire Avenue center and gym, two large athletic fields, and is nearing completion of a

community center. The City currently has an operating budget of \$75 per capita for recreation and parks which will increase approximately \$13 with the opening of the community center.

## ***Findings***

The City's recreation program is funded by general revenues. The FY05 budget is \$1,049,000, including \$75,000 for half-year staffing of the community center. Additionally, \$266,080 is budgeted for city-owned park and public grounds maintenance carried out by crews of the public works department.

Takoma Park residents, meanwhile, collectively paid \$10.4 million in property taxes to the County in FY05, of which \$826,800 was allocated to the M-NCPPC and \$258,440 was designated by the County as the recreational tax.

Montgomery County pays the City an annual fee of \$100,000 to operate the New Hampshire Avenue facility and a \$71,740 rebate for park maintenance. In addition, the County contributed a cumulative \$2,300,000 in capital funds for Takoma Park's new community center. However, the County has not made any commitment to Takoma Park for assistance related to the operation and maintenance of the community center and programs therein.

## ***Options and Recommendations***

Building additional recreation facilities and expanding recreation programs in Takoma Park will require either increased revenue or the reprogramming of funds. The Committee believes reprogramming of funds is a policy judgment reserved to the City Council, but the Committee has considered options to assist the City in generating additional revenue.

### **Generating additional revenue for recreation & parks in Takoma Park**

**The following option is highly recommended as a means of gaining a tax cut for city taxpayers:**

- **Opt Out of the County Property Tax Earmarked for Recreation:** Although Takoma Park did not opt out of paying the County recreational tax in 1927, it is not foreclosed from reversing that situation. Today, the absence of county recreation programs within the City, the Takoma Park Recreation Department's expanded delivery of services, and the imminent opening of Takoma Park's community center collectively make the argument that the City should no longer be obligated to pay the annual recreational tax of approximately \$250,000. To opt out of the tax, the City must secure approval from the County.

**The following options are recommended as a means of increasing revenue for city taxpayers:**

- The Committee recommends the City request an additional annual payment from the County to cover ongoing operating expenses for recreation. This should be a set payment not open to regular revisions, similar to the payment for operations of Takoma Park’s library.
  - Negotiate an Annual Payment from the County for the City’s Delivery of Recreation Services: A substantial number of non-city residents participate in and benefit from the use of city programs, including underserved young people in nearby Silver Spring. The Takoma Park Recreation Department reports that non-city residents account for about 20 percent of those enrolled in city-run recreation programs. At the same time the City is required to provide recreation services to its own residents because the County no longer offers easily accessible programs, especially for the large percentage of city residents who work long hours and rely on mass transit. Even programs at the Long Branch community center are targeted to county residents in an area much greater than Takoma Park and are not geographically convenient to such Takoma Park population centers as the Maple Avenue apartment corridor. Montgomery County itself has recognized the breadth of need for recreation services in the down-county area and the singular role the City plays in addressing that need. County funding assistance for construction of Takoma Park’s community center – to date totaling more than \$2 million – testifies to the County’s ongoing commitment to support the delivery of recreation services locally.
- The Committee recommends the pursuit of a rebate as a third option, less preferable than an opt-out of the recreational tax or a set annual payment.
  - Negotiate a Rebate from the County Due to the Elimination of Proximate Recreation Services: Another alternative lies in the payment of a rebate for the recreational spending the City has taken on as a consequence of the County’s withdrawal of close-in programming. An equitable rebate, the Committee believes, should be greater than the \$100,000 the County currently pays each year. On the other hand, a rebate negotiation is complex and subject to renegotiation.

The Committee considers the following option to be less viable than the three options listed above:

- Negotiate an Abatement of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission Tax: There is no way to determine how much of the approximately \$800,000 in Takoma Park taxes allocated each year to the M-NCPPC is spent on services within city limits, but M-NCPPC does attend to the Sligo Creek and Long Branch park systems as well as other parks (Opal Daniels, Takoma-Piney Branch, Takoma Urban Park, SSI Park, Takoma Park South Neighborhood Park, Takoma Park Neighborhood Park and the grounds at the recreation center on New Hampshire Avenue). It would be difficult for Takoma Park to follow the lead of Rockville and Gaithersburg, both of which pay essentially no M-NCPPC taxes and receive no direct benefits, because M-NCPPC

historically has not been willing to transfer maintenance of any section of the Sligo Creek and Long Branch park systems.

## **Exploring alternatives to city delivery of recreation services**

The Committee considered other options to improve local recreation services through partnerships with outside entities that would not necessarily result in an increase in City expenditures. In addition, the Committee considered whether savings could be obtained through divestiture of City recreation services to Montgomery County or to a private entity.

- The Committee recommends the City be creative and aggressive in finding new partners for recreation programming, bearing in mind the underserved must have fair access to the programs.
  - Pursue Partnerships with Public and Private Entities for Recreation Programs. With the opening of the new community center, opportunities will exist for the City to form relationships with other providers of recreation services, such as the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. In such partnerships the City could make space available in exchange for delivery of services.
- The Committee recommends the City explore the possibility of gaining access to such facilities on a partnership basis for the enhancement of recreation services.
  - Pursue Partnerships with Public and Private Entities for Access to Facilities. Although the City already makes use of available space in the local public elementary and middle schools, other facilities may be available at Montgomery College and Columbia Union College.

### **Options that are not recommended:**

- Transfer Recreation Programs to the County. Savings to the City would undoubtedly be realized, not only in current expenditures but in future costs to build, maintain and staff city-owned facilities and programs, if the City were to return to the era of dependence on the County for recreation services. However, a transfer of recreation services to the County would effectively terminate most or all of the programs currently provided inside city limits. Even if the County agreed to operate the New Hampshire Avenue recreation center, which the County has heretofore declined to do, that facility has limited capacity and is difficult for many city residents to reach. Nor does it seem likely the County Recreation Department would be inclined to operate programs out of the city-owned community center since the County is already staffing the Long Branch community center. The net result of a transfer to the County almost certainly would be far fewer recreation services for city residents, especially for the underserved; and
- Contract with a Private Entity to Provide Recreation Programs inside the City. Takoma Park residents value the special understanding the City recreation staff has for designing and operating programs. Recreation staffers drawn from Takoma Park have been able to build and sustain relationships with their clientele, particularly youth, that would be difficult for contractors to develop. While outsourcing program administration to an outside entity such as the YMCA could theoretically bring savings due to administrative efficiencies, the savings would be minimal, and

outsourcing could sacrifice responsiveness to the underserved and reduce the full measure of accountability now enjoyed.

## *Summary*

Today the City is the sole provider of government-run recreation inside city limits, offering after-school programs, classes, sports and other activities. Except for a \$100,000 annual payment for operating expenses at the New Hampshire Avenue facility, and a \$71,740 for park maintenance, the City receives no additional rebates.

The Committee offers the following two primary recommendations for recreation and parks:

- The City should request opting out of paying the county recreation tax. If successful, this would mean a direct savings to city taxpayers of an estimated \$250,000 each year; and
- The City should request a set annual payment from the County to reflect the City's provision of recreation programs to underserved populations, including those who live outside the city limits in nearby neighborhoods.